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TDCJ Visitation Committee survey

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The Texas Department of Criminal Justice understands that visitation plays an important role in achieving two parts of the agency's mission: to promote positive

change in offender behavior and reintegrate offenders into society. Maintaining the support of family and friends in the free world makes a positive impact on offender behavior during incarceration and reduces the likelihood of recidivism upon release. To increase the likelihood of successful reintegration, the agency encourages offender visitation and works hard to improve procedures while maintaining security.

As part of the agency's continuing effort to increase the number and quality of offender visits, and consistent with a legislative mandate to review visitation policies, TDCJ formed a Visitation Committee in 2013. The committee, composed of agency employees from a variety of departments and divisions, conducted a five-month survey to obtain constructive feedback from the public. By early

2014, the agency had received nearly 3,000 responses which indicated that most visitors report their treatment by agency staff as either excellent or good. Respondents found the *General Information Guide for Families of Offenders*, the TDCJ website and the *Offender Rules and Regulations for Visitation* to be helpful. Agency staff received a good job rating regarding visitation oversight, and handling problems in a timely manner and according to the visitation policy.

The survey showed that most visitors travel less than 150 miles to get to their offender's housing unit, and those who travel 300 miles or more were allowed to schedule an extended visit. A majority of respondents had been visiting offenders for five years or fewer and had never been turned away once they arrived for a visit, with most exceptions involving violations of the agency's visitation dress code. Visitors who brought children were usually accompanied by one or two youngsters of various ages, usually over the age of 11.

Significant changes have been implemented to offender visitation during the past year; enhanced activities were added in the visi-

tation areas to allow children to interact with each other. Children's books and activity sheets with crayons allow children and parents to participate in activities together, strengthening their familial bonds. Also, the TDCJ website was enhanced to allow family and friends to determine if an offender is eligible for visits, and to provide them with up-to-date information concerning rules and regulations so they can properly prepare for their visit.

Positive changes have also been made to the TDCJ Offender Visitation Plan, to include simplifying policies for extended visits, increasing the number of contact visits for eligible offenders, and providing extended visitation for offenders in the Hospice Program and those diagnosed as terminally ill who are receiving palliative care.

The recent changes to visitation policy reflect the agency's ongoing commitment to improve visitation consistent with public safety and security requirements. On behalf of the Board of Criminal Justice, I want to thank everyone whose efforts help make visitation a positive experience for the families and friends of offenders. ●